

The Salt Lake Tribune

High mercury prompts new Utah fish consumption warnings

Health • Advisory on fish consumption lists about two dozen contaminated Utah sites.

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State health and environmental regulators updated fish consumption warnings for mercury Thursday, just as Utahns started packing up for holiday weekend getaways.

Children under age 6 and pregnant women should not eat largemouth bass from Quail Creek Reservoir in Washington County and Recapture Reservoir in San Juan County, according to the latest advisory. And they should not eat walleye over 12 inches from Starvation Reservoir in Duchesne County or any walleye from Yuba Reservoir in Juab and Sanpete counties.

In addition, northern pike from Yuba Reservoir should be limited to just one serving a month by children and pregnant women, according to the latest advisory by the Utah Department of Health and the state divisions of wildlife resources and environmental quality.

With the new announcements, the tally of contaminated sites statewide stands at about two dozen — with all but a few posing the greatest risk from toxic mercury. Nonetheless, state officials were quick to add that fish is generally a healthy food choice.

"Keep in mind, fish is still a healthy part of the diet," said Amy Dickey, a leader in the fish advisory program. "Follow the advisories and choose wisely."

Why mercury is turning up in lakes and streams around the state continues to be a discussion of the Mercury Work Group. After about eight years of brainstorming, the regulators, government scientists, academics, industries and advocacy groups who make up the group still struggle over a lack of staffing and funding.

And, while they've learned a lot about the Great Salt Lake as a mercury-making machine and the gold mines in Nevada as a likely source of some of the pollution, they still have lots of questions. For instance, on Thursday they mulled how climate cycles might be playing a role in fluctuating mercury levels and the role selenium plays in boosting the toxic form of mercury.

Though naturally occurring, mercury can build up, sometimes drifting into waterways from the air and upstream mining, the thinking goes. It can be transformed into its toxic form, methylmercury, which accumulates in nerves and muscles. It poses the greatest threat to young children and women who are nursing, pregnant or trying to become pregnant because of potential neurological damage.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has issued health recommendations for mercury from fish that is based on how much is consumed. Utah and other states have looked to these guidelines to develop their own advisories.

The state has discovered in testing at hundreds of Utah locations that about 10 percent of Utah's waters have fish with elevated levels of mercury. That leads to the consumption-based guidelines that are linked to typical body weights.

"Any health risks associated with eating fish from the high-mercury areas are based on long-term consumption and are not tied to eating fish occasionally," noted a news release on the latest advisories. "There is no health risk associated with mercury in the water for other uses of the reservoirs, streams, rivers or creeks, such as swimming, boating and waterskiing."

Roger Wilson of the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources pointed out that smaller walleye are also perfectly safe to eat at Starvation.

"Just stay within the guidelines," he said.

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Utah fish advisories



Updated Utah fish-consumption advisories State health and environmental regulators updated fish-consumption advisories for mercury on Thursday, bringing to about two dozen the number of contaminated sites. Anglers are urged to limit consumption of fish from these waters.

3.1

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O Find the latest advisories about fish and fishing around the state. > www.fishadvisories.utah.gov

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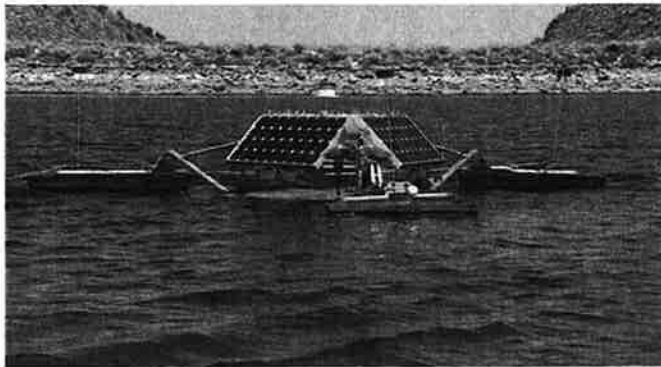
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Deseret News

2 new waterways added to Utah's mercury advisory

By Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News

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New testing reveals two additional waterways, Starvation and Recapture Reservoirs, are under a mercury advisory issued by the Utah Department of Environmental Quality in conjunction with state health and natural resource agencies. (Marc Weaver, Deseret News)

SALT LAKE CITY — Starvation and Recapture reservoirs have joined the list of Utah waterways under the state's mercury advisory, which means health warnings for consumption.

The state also added a new species — largemouth bass at Recapture Reservoir — to the list, as well modifying an existing location, Quail Creek Reservoir, for largemouth bass.

Pregnant women and children under age 6 in particular are vulnerable to

mercury toxicity and should avoid consumption of fish to prevent an intake of mercury that exceeds the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's health recommendations.

Women of child-bearing age should limit consumption of largemouth bass from mercury-contaminated waterways to no more than 8 ounces in one month, while women past child-bearing years and men may have four 8-ounce portions a month.

An 8-ounce serving is equivalent to the size of two decks of playing cards.

Mercury is a naturally occurring element that can be transformed into methyl mercury, a toxic form found naturally in some waters. Chronic exposure to low concentrations of methyl mercury in fish may result in neurological effects in developing fetuses and children.

There is no health risk associated with mercury in the water for other uses of the reservoirs, streams, rivers or creeks, such as swimming, boating and waterskiing.

Amy Dickey, an environmental scientist with the division, said the good news is that after testing hundreds of water bodies, health officials have found that less than 10 percent of Utah's waters have fish with elevated levels of mercury in their tissue.

"It is relatively small, so we like to stress that fish is an important, healthy part of your diet," Dickey said.

Starvation and Recapture reservoirs are among nearly two dozen waterways or drainages that are on the mercury health advisory list. Not all water bodies have been tested in Utah. The state has a mercury work group that meets twice a year to discuss the latest research, funding opportunities and new strategies for dealing with the issue.

3.3

More information can be found at www.mercury.utah.gov

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